NATURE AND NURTURE IN MENTAL HYGIENE*

By H. CRICHTON-MILLER, F.R.C.P.

THE subject of our discussion to-day is both difficult and important. My natural qualifications to open the discussion are admittedly inadequate. But my experience in life has been such as to qualify even a dull observer to express serious views on the subject, and that for two reasons.

First of all I am professionally engaged in assessing the sources of maladjustment, neurotic or psychotic, and endeavouring thereby to assess how much of the patient's trouble is inherited and irremediable and how much is acquired and perhaps curable.

In the second place I have had the unusual advantage of studying at very close quarters the interplay of nature and nurture, of heredity and environment, of breeding and rearing in six healthy members of the race. Their ages are 24 to 34 and they have all survived the process.

Now we all know how hard it frequently is to differentiate between inherited and acquired characteristics. I suggest that in no field is this differentiation more difficult than in matters of thought, feeling and behaviour. We may accept the blood type and hair section as invariably inherited, but eye colour would seem in some cases to be modified by environment. An ear for music is rarely acquired, though there are enthusiasts who claim that they can train the tone-deaf to recognize pitch. But in behaviour, normal and abnormal, the frontier is frequently open to dispute. Take memory, for example. We are constantly confronted in the advertisement columns of the weekly press with the assertions of grateful pupils that their memories have been miraculously improved by this or that system of memory training. Yet the academic psychologists seem to have proved beyond a doubt that memory is a congenital faculty incapable of genuine modification. I can accept that scientific claim because I have suffered from an unreliable memory all my life. When I was an undergraduate I put myself through a course of so-called memory training. As a result I was able to recite in 9½ minutes without a single mistake the value of π to 750 places of decimals. But for ordinary purposes my memory remained as it was. In short, heredity defied education, nature was stronger than nurture. Or to take an example from my own field of work; how often has a patient claimed that his insomnia was inherited from his father—or, more likely, from his mother. In most cases it emerges that, of the many complex factors that can contribute to the disturbance of the sleep function, hereditary factors counted for little or nothing, whereas identification, or other morbid emotional cause, accounted entirely for the symptom. Or let us take asthma: I remember a well-known authoress who suffered from this distressing complaint. When it was suggested that she should resort to psychological treatment she said naïvely, "That would be no good because I inherited it from my mother." Now while it was true that the mother had been a life-long sufferer from asthma it was also true that her daughter had nursed her for many years and had only developed her own asthma on the mother's death. It was difficult to escape from the inference that powerful emotional factors, rather than heredity, were accountable for the condition.

So much for the complexity of our problem. Now let us turn to the hereditary side of mental health, in other words, mate-selection. Man's unique distinction from all sub-human species lies in his ability to control his instinctive behaviour in accordance with a

* The substance of a paper read at an informal luncheon of the *Eugenics Society* on November 25th, 1941.

chosen purpose. In other words, mating for man can be a conceptual as opposed to a purely perceptual issue. Or to make it simpler still we may say that the ape bases his choice of a mate purely on the relative attraction of the available specimens and that without any consideration of the probable resultant progeny. Man on the other hand can, if he will, bring reason, science and imagination to bear on the choice. Jack may, for instance, resist Gertie's blandishments because he has seen Gertie's mentally defective brother. If he does so he will be showing a perfectly understandable concern for the future generation. And for this he deserves credit. But if Jack were a really informed man he would not terminate his suit at that point. He would recognize that mental defect may be attributable to causes other than heredity, and that a scientific investigation of the brother's condition should be the only basis for a final decision. But what would Gertie's parents say if the attentions he had paid to Gertie were to cease abruptly? Maybe they would despise Jack as a laggard in love; or else they would blame themselves for not having buried the brother in an appropriate institution instead of exposing the skeleton in the domestic cupboard.

In short the desirable attitude to marriage should be dominated by the spirit of progressive adventure, the spirit in which a great enterprise in the unknown is undertaken with every rational precaution and yet with burning enthusiasm. Instead of that the average marriage partakes of the nature of an irresponsible speculation intended to serve as an escape from frustration and boredom. What would we say of a stock-breeder who acquired his bull and his heifers on a basis of appearance only without troubling to investigate pedigrees? What would we say of a man who invested all his capital in a business without stopping to examine the firm's books? For years an eminent psychiatrist—Colonel Goodall—has been advocating the necessity for pedigrees on a nation-wide scale. But what is the use of pedigrees if no one is disposed to use them? At present they are only used, as far as I know, in Germany and there the use made of them is blind and ruthless. But in a Utopian community mate-selection would be based upon spontaneous attraction controlled by scientific records. We are so accustomed in this country to grant to every individual complete freedom of choice that we hesitate even to discuss any procedure for limiting that freedom. Then we hotly discuss voluntary sterilization of the unfit, a measure so partial in its possibilities as to be almost negligible. We don't want mate-selection to be shorn of its individual and romantic qualities, but we do need to inspire the youths of our land with a parental, that is a eugenic, outlook. Such an outlook should ideally induce a young man not merely to eschew the mate of doubtful pedigree. It should have its positive aspect as well. The highly artistic should realize that it is dangerous for two of them to mate, just as the progeny of the profoundly repetitive type are liable to be repetitive to the point of dullness. Two people who have epilepsy in their families, though not in the immediate ancestry, should know that their progeny would stand a poor chance, not necessarily of developing epilepsy, but of inheriting the psychasthenic temperament, which always reacts badly to the difficulties of this exacting world.

In short, the youth in my Utopia would be inspired by an informed idealism that resulted in a sort of genetic longsightedness to take the place of the narrow vision and false ideals that enter into mate-selection in so many cases to-day.

Now let us pass from nature to nurture. I have referred to the difficulty of estimating the relative factors of temperament and experience that go to produce abnormalities of function and behaviour. Medical psychology has in the last thirty years enabled us to revise our views on these matters. We know now that distortions of branch or bough formerly attributed to heredity are but the logical development of the bent twig. We know now that character formation at the university is a highly limited process compared to what goes on in the school, and that development at school is negligible compared to the paramount importance of the first five

years. We realize to-day that the only child of well-mated parents is handicapped for life; that the child who recognizes that it is unwanted has to cope with such a burden of devaluation as to make normal development hardly attainable; that the psychology of the orphanage can outweigh hereditary advantages and disadvantages, and that the witnessing of parental strife in early years never fails to leave a permanent scar.

Let us then think of environment as related to mental health, in terms of these highly important first five years. And let us be assured that if the child reaches his first school with a sound heredity and a sound home development he is likely to become a good citizen even if his subsequent school environment and experience are only mediocre.

First of all then, what is our rough idea of the good citizen and his character equipment? I suggest for the purposes of brevity two main criteria.

1. He should be able to adjust his passions and desires to reality.
2. He should be willing to face the intolerable burden of consecutive thought.

By the first of these I mean to indicate that every escape from reality is a weakness. And in this connection I have but to indicate the tone of the press, not in this country only but in all countries where the press is free. The uncongenial and the depressing however true are omitted or glossed over. Why? Because the mass of newspaper readers cannot face stark reality but must have news, and particularly headlines, that coincide with their hopes and wishes.

And as for the burden of consecutive thought I ask you what evidence have we that the mass of the people display any readiness to make the necessary effort? The average cinema programme is presumably adjusted to the demands of the average citizen. Can anyone claim that it represents anything but an escape from the effort of thinking? Ask the B.B.C. authorities if the items that demand thought are popular in relation to those that are a mere escape. I think I know what their answer would be.

Well now, what have these first five years to do with the mental health of the adult citizen? Believe it or not, a great deal. Schooling no doubt counts for a lot but the habit of facing reality or escaping from it, and the habit of making effort or running away from it—these habits are formed to a great extent before the alphabet has been mastered. Therefore I say that in the first five years a child should learn that life in general is trustworthy and that effort is worthwhile. Without the first of these lessons he will never achieve complete independence, he will never stand up to reality in its more painful or exacting aspects, he will never be at ease with truth, he will never develop a spirit of true adventure. And unless he learns early that effort is worthwhile he will never make his peace with the school's demand for learning, nor with the world's demand for honest contribution, still less with life's stern demand for clear thinking. After all suggestibility in the individual and in the mass is the greatest enemy of social evolution. And it is before he reaches school much more than later that the child develops a bias towards mental dependence or mental independence.

And what are the main conditions of a child learning these lessons? I think there are three: security, valuation and freedom, and in that order.

The sense of security more than any other factor conditions all development towards reality. Insecurity begets fear, distrust, suspicion, evasion. The child who has learned to make himself scarce when he hears father's step on the stair is the child that only learns his lessons to escape punishment, only works to earn wages, only refrains from crime to avoid the police.

Valuation comes next to security in importance. A child that learns that it is illegitimate is devalued for life. No legislation can erase that feeling. It is usual to conceal the fact of illegitimacy by false explanations. That is all very well till the falsehood is discovered. Then the double affront bursts on the child: "They never wanted me and mother has been lying to me all this time." I need not stress this point.

But there are minor degrees of unwantedness that are very important. I remember the passionate exclamation of a woman who had attempted suicide: "How could they have wanted a seventh daughter and a ninth child?" Then there is the not unusual attitude of otherwise well-meaning parents represented by the familiar clichés: "If you knew what I went through before you were born . . ."—"You don't remember how much it costs to feed and clothe you"—"You're a proper nuisance and you wouldn't be here if *I* had had my way," and so on. Trivial, did I hear you say? Not really meant in earnest? But these and similar remarks are quoted in our clinics and consulting rooms by grown-up people who have failed to live down the crushing sense of devaluation. And in this connection I would like to direct your consideration to the following problem. We hear a lot nowadays of the "Old School Tie." According to the view of the speaker the class thus designated is either winning the war for us or in process of losing it. I am going to suggest that the class referred to, with all its virtues and failures, is in a position of leadership *not* because of the playing fields of Eton nor the public school tradition but because it began life in a nursery. Now this probably sounds to most of you arrant nonsense, but I am not speaking without considerable opportunities of observation. The child in a servantless house is the child of a busy woman. The more children the busier the mother is. From birth his life is subordinated to the exigencies of adult life in the home. He is either competing with brothers and sisters or else he is vainly trying to command mother's attention. In the nursery the child feels that he is in a safe sort of haven and unless the nanny is much worse than most of her breed, he has additional valuation from her, he has less necessity to make his presence felt, he has more freedom to follow his own interests. But the British nursery is disappearing and the population of our public schools will undergo a radical change in the quality of their boys, and the old school tie will stand for a different class of citizens, a class whose early years have been far less favourably conditioned than those most of us remember. I commend this line of thought to your consideration.

The time is far spent and I cannot discuss the value of freedom to the child; let me but repeat that it is well-nigh worthless where there is neither security nor valuation.

And in conclusion let me return to my original thesis. If we are to achieve a higher level of mental health in our citizens we must have long-sighted parents—parents who have come together not merely to give each other a good time, not merely to breed a child or two from good stock, but parents who realize that the business of parenthood can be the most exacting as it can be the most rewarding of human enterprises, parents who will realize that education outside the home, whether provided by the State or acquired at a great cost, can never make up for the deficiencies of home life. In short we want to see a change in the centre of gravity in all breeding and rearing, a change of emphasis from the individual that is seen and temporal to the race that is unseen and eternal.